



WESTERN NEWS

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Volunteer board organizing

County not eligible to receive Grace-EPA settlement

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With the county nixed as a recipient by W.R. Grace and the Environmental Protection Agency, a volunteer board is organizing to manage a \$275 million settlement for asbestos-related health care.

The settlement was agreed upon by Grace and EPA to resolve an access dispute over Grace-controlled properties in the Libby area. It is intended to provide funding for health care needs

not met by Grace's existing medical plan for victims of asbestos-related disease.

The terms of the settlement require the money to be managed by a nonprofit corporation. Lincoln County had been moving toward accepting the funds based on a preliminary nod from an EPA attorney, but concerns that

arose during a meeting last week between Grace and EPA officials put an end to those plans.

The county commissioners called a

meeting for Monday night to discuss the formation of a private nonprofit corporation to manage the settlement money. Invitations were extended to people involved in asbestos and health care issues, and an advertisement was placed in last Friday's issue of *The Western News*.

About two dozen people met Monday in the Ponderosa Room at Libby City Hall. A summary of the meeting is on page 4. See Settlement on Page 4.

Settlement

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situation was provided by Allan Payne, a Helena attorney retained by the county to provide assistance in dealings with W.R. Grace and asbestos issues.

The settlement has been given preliminary approval by a federal judge in Missoula and has also been approved by a bankruptcy court. All that remains is for the paperwork to be resubmitted to the judge in Missoula for his signature. Once that happens, there is a 10-day deadline for an existing nonprofit corporation approved by Grace and the EPA to accept the funds; otherwise Grace will appoint its own board.

If the community can agree on an entity to receive the funds, the EPA will offer support and Grace will likely give its approval as well, Payne said.

"It's a lot of work for them to put together their own organization," he said.

The EPA is willing to hold off on submitting the paperwork to the judge for a couple of weeks to allow a local group to form, Payne said.

"They're not going to hold it forever," he said.

The settlement agreement provides a broad definition of health benefits for which the money can be used, Payne said. Possibilities include continued screenings for people who have previously received negative or equivocal test

results for asbestos-related disease as well as various other medical expenses not met by Grace's health plan.

"The people who are going to sit on the board are going to have some very, very tough decisions to make on that," Payne said.

The group at Monday's meeting agreed on a rough outline of the types of people who should be on a seven- to nine-member board. Suggestions included representatives of St. John's Lutheran Hospital, the Center for Asbestos Related Disease, the Community Health Center, the county health board, the Community Advisory Group, people with expertise in financial, legal, insurance and long-term health care issues; an educator; a member of the business community; a representative of the state Legislature; a senior citizen and at least one asbestos victim.

Another meeting is scheduled for 7 p.m. Thursday at the Ponderosa Room to begin putting names of potential board members on the list. The county commissioners have scheduled a meeting for 2 p.m. Monday, Feb. 25, at the VFW community hall to receive public comment and make a recommendation on the makeup of the board.

For more information, contact Bill Bischoff at 293-7781 extension 201 or Ron Anderson or Deb Bertelsen at 293-7781 extension 228.